

Intro:	<a href="#">00:04</a>	This is Force for Hire, a deep dive into private military contracting and how it's transforming the battlefield. I'm Michelle Harven and I'm Desmon Farris.
Michelle Harven:	<a href="#">00:12</a>	Johann Raath has been in the business for a while. He started in the South African National Defense Force when he was just 17 and left military contracting just two years ago at age 50 he's done pretty much everything from escorting military convoys to VIP protection to maritime work and he was among the many joining the efforts to rebuild Iraq after the 2003 invasion.
Desmon Farris:	<a href="#">00:38</a>	Johann has been tested along the way with ambushes and even getting locked up by Iraqi officials, which is definitely a story you'll want to stick around to hear. He also wrote a book about his experience called Blood Money, which was the first eye witness account written by a South African contractor in Iraq, but before the boom of contractors in the Middle East. Johann was already in the contracting game working as a guard for the president.
Michelle Harven:	<a href="#">01:03</a>	When the contract ended, he and many of his colleagues got jobs in Iraq and it was an adventure from the very start. We'll let Johann take it from here.
Johann Raath:	<a href="#">01:14</a>	So I arrived in Iraq in April, 2004 by the time I worked there, there was a lady, a couple of South African skilled and end a few, a bunch of Americans and British private military contractors. I still remember, I wrote the letter to my family and I said, I'm moving from IAT to Iraq and it is dangerous. There are people dying and they all people getting wounded. But at the end of the day, you know, I'm a professional soldier and I was on my life faced in the military and then in the private sector, but you, you remain the soldiers and my family understood that although, you know, my mother and your sister and everybody is a little bit sad and um, you know, people get, I mean, and so on and so forth. At the end of the day, they accepted the fact that this is what I wanted to do. And I went over there and I was there for any 10 days and I were in the thick of things already, but we were sent on a reconnaissance mission, self of Baghdad in the area called the Death Triangle for no other reason than it was a place where a lot of people died.
Johann Raath:	<a href="#">02:14</a>	It was a very dangerous area. Um, there was a power station that had to be revamped and expanded and a portion of it, they had to be rebuilt. Um, it was, uh, a core of engineer, you say s uh, contract as far as I can remember. And our team had to go and do a reconnaissance on the area of where this power station was going to be established because we had to go and

build a camp day and they made to receive the engineers from Texas, from America that was going to do the footwork and start with the engineering works with the power station. And on the way there, we got ambushed by a bunch of insurgents and um, you know, early on in Iraq, we didn't have armored vehicles. We all around in normal, we call it soft skin vehicles. So between the two guys, we had the Pajero and the BMW.

Johann Raath: [03:05](#)

We took around fourty, AK-47 shots, three, that one driver got shot through both arms. Um, the medic got hit in the head, but it was, he was fortunate, he was just glanced. I took it down to the chase, but fortunately I had bullet, uh, you know, I had PPE on me, so I had plates in my, in my bulletproof jacket and that stopped a round. So we got warmed up properly. Um, Eh, we had to seek medical attention and evacuation and so on. And then I realized, um, you know, there in, in that ambush, um, it was a [int] box as we call it. Dick was vehicles moving on the freeway self of Baghdad and they pulled in between us and next to us and they opened fire, you know, from the vehicle. So we were closed up with them. And I saw something day that day that I haven't seen before in Africa and other conflicts or war zones that I've been in.

Johann Raath: [03:56](#)

I saw, you know, the eyes of my attacker and, and that, that really captured me. And it fascinated me that I could see somebody have so much hate and bloodlust and conviction in his eyes determined to kill you as a foreigner. And I realized that this is a different ball game. These people have a different mindset that's attacking us. And then I started studying the terrorist organizations in the Middle East and the ideologies and you know, why are they some, I let them, but what I realized is that, you know, you need to know exactly where your enemies because they were like, that came from all sides. It was kids, um, that was coaxed into throwing grenades at the American forces and the contractors. Eventually in 2005, they were women that dressed up in, you know, uh, as suicide bombers and, and women couldn't be searched at the checkpoints and stuff at the time.

Johann Raath: [04:51](#)

So that was, uh, you know, you had to keep your eye on the ball all the time. And there were so many different insurgency groups. It was not one group only, it wasn't an al Qaeda in Iraq or anybody else. So I studied that very attentively and, and you know, I made it my business to find out what is going on. And from there, yeah, I moved down into very many different dangerous areas. We got to a side bombed. We got rocketed more that ambush. Um, a lot of people die around me. I was fortunate on a few occasions, but the, initially everybody was

caught off guard with the level of violence, the type of bonds that they bought, you know, the bad things, the, the cruelty to their own people. It, it, it, it could get overwhelming at times if you are not properly conditioned, mentally conditioned, it could overwhelm you.

Johann Raath: [05:46](#)

But, um, it was in the early days, you know, 2004, five, six, seven. Those were the dangerous years in Iraq and from a South African perspective, um, the first half African was killed in January, 2004 and they were 38 South Africans that were killed working as private military contract is from 2004 until 2010. And these stats anytime at now when I researched my book, they were not really accurate numbers anyway reflected because a lot of families wanted to keep it quiet and you know, we, we're not really supposed to be there. And the government, Al government tried to stop the guys from working overseas and conflict zones and so on and so forth. So the truth came out of the book, but um, double the, that amount got seriously wounded and maimed and injured and killed. And that's why I called my book black money. Um, I knew it would throw attention and people would say, yeah, look, yeah, it's a bunch of mercenaries going to kill people for money. But it is not it in execution of our protective duties working for mostly American security companies on a United States government contracts. We've laid the same as what the soldiers did and and what the other coalition forces that. So there was no distinction between the private military contractor, what a US servicemen or the British servicemen if you are a foreigner and you had to do with with the reconstruction process of Iraq, you were a dog

Desmon Farris: [07:13](#)

when we come back. A new contracting job spells is fortunate for Johan, which changes his life forever.

Michelle Harven: [07:21](#)

Stay informed on all the news that matters most to the military community with a subscription to stars and stripes digital access. As a subscriber you'll enjoy unlimited access to the stripes.com website and our stars and Stripes Mobile Apps updated 24 seven by reporters stationed at military bases around the globe. Subscribe today and enter the Promo Code podcast when signing up for a yearly subscription and receive 50% off your first year. Get exclusive access to special features, interactive articles, award-winning photography and more. Visit stripes.com/digital and enter the Promo Code podcast to subscribe today.

Johann Raath: [08:10](#)

Well, up until this date, the only maritime work that was done by security teams was my last project in Iraq. It ran from 2013 to 2017 and that was the construction of a breakwater line, um,

for the new deep sea port. Because right at the tip of Iraq is a little village called Al-Faw. So the first phase of this contract was one by a Greek construction company to build the 8,000 meter, eight kilometer breakwater line, um, into the Persian Gulf. And then the other one, the waste breakwater line is still under construction. That's a 14 to 14 kilometer breakwater line on the Kuwait side. So they had like barges and they had cranes and stuff on boats. They had construction boats out on the Persian Gulf and these boats needed protection. So, you know, it was a challenge for me. Nobody knew how to put boats on the, on, on the Persian Gulf, in, in Iraqi territorial waters.

Johann Raath:

[09:17](#)

Um, they don't have, it goes God, the Navy did and they have a two. They didn't even have voted that they made sure if a navy, so, you know, he does a new system that I had to get approved because um, everything you're doing in the rock has to be approved by the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Defense. And then, you know, the navy got involved in and you know, by then in 2013 the US forces as withdrawn and they ended power over to the Iraqis. I had to create the procedure and everybody wanted to make money because they very good up. Um, and yeah, it was a headache, but I managed to do get it going. And yeah, we got like inflatables, um, rigid old boats with strong engines on them. And we put together the guards on there with, with uh, assault rifles and we'd patrol day and night.

Johann Raath:

[10:03](#)

We had to be, because the construction crews that built the breakwater line work there 24 hours shelf day, a day shift. And my shift crews working underwater and above water. So we had to have our maritime patrol boats there, uh, between the, uh, maritime construction assets. So it was a challenge. It was an interesting exercise. Then, you know, we were there for a little while. There's a lot of buyers are going on there in the Persian Gulf because there's a lot of smuggling between Iran and Iraq and Saudi and go out in those places to smugglers. They smuggle diesel and they smuggled fuel, they smuggled firearms and vehicles and they're now, my guys were there. Um, patrolling the Iraqi territorial waters and uh, yeah, we got shot at once or twice, um, by, by bidets diving, by taking shots at our guys that shot back at them.

Johann Raath:

[10:52](#)

The project, it was of high value. It was close to \$300 million and all your procurement now had to occur through Iraqi companies that had to bring the materials in again, your life support, um, and, and everything else that you need to build your camp. And there was a lot of corruption and they were crime syndicate. So there was a crime racket going on. They were stealing a lot of stuff from this construction company. And

you know, any project in Iraq, especially in the later years, you had to point the Iraqis to work for you to go and do the procurement in town and to speak the language. And we couldn't drive cars ourselves in Iraq in that the years you had to have an Iraqi driver, and of course you want to give some upliftment to the community and the local village and jobs and so on and so forth.

Johann Raath: [11:37](#)

But unfortunately, a large element of that was from a tribe that, um, decided to steal a lot and to enrich themselves from this project instead of uplifting the community. And so when we started putting the patrols day and the roadblocks on land and maritime patrols and see they couldn't smuggle diesel's, particularly diesel fuel that they siphoned off the construction, um, maritime craft and off the tugboats and so on, because the smuggling of diesel fuel in, in Iraq and in the Middle East is a big business. Um, they, they, they dilute that and I sell it for cheap and, um, you know, it's a real big problem. So I was hampering progress, my security team and I with my security plans. So they devised a plan. They went to the local magistrate and a local colonel that was in on the theft directed part of the syndicate and they got a proper one.

Johann Raath: [12:33](#)

And it was signed by a magistrate for my arrest. So, you know, I woke up one Friday morning early, um, my little, uh, caravan, uh, was surrounded by a bunch of border police guys in machine guns and they raided my room and they went through all my stuff and they said that, uh, I'm a terrorist. That was in 2014. It was a month after ISIS invaded northern Iraq. You know, Isis announced himself to the world that 10th of June, 2014 when they invaded Iraq from Syria, um, from Raqqa. And they took over Mosul, the second largest city. They got all of half a billion dollars in cash and another half a billion dollars in gold. So overnight they were the richest terrorist organization in the world. So a month later, the theft syndicate, because then, um, you know, they did clear the caliphate from Raqqa to Mosul and there was a lot of foreign fighters from all over the world joining Isis.

Johann Raath: [13:32](#)

There was up to 30,000 foreigners from all sorts of places in the world, including the U.S. and the U.K. and France and places like that that went to join ISIS. So there was a lot of foreigners that came, uh, to join the ranks of ISIS. And they use this as an excuse. They said that I was a foreigner and you know, that I am aiding ISIS. So they had the whole thing worked out. Cause all of Iraq, was paranoid about foreigners at that time. Anybody that, but I mean, we've been working in the country for decades already. They knew us, they knew our movements. They knew

they could track our visas, they could see, we worked with the U.S. military on U.S. military contracts and so on and so forth. But anyway, I was accused to be a terrorist. So, um, the magistrate signed it and the general signed off on it.

Johann Raath:

[14:22](#)

And of course they all crooks. They all get money from, from the thief syndicate that wanted to take me out of play so that I can stop and putting the smuggling prices. So I was taken to the border patrol police station where I spent many hours being denigrated and then they moved me to Basra, to a prison where I was in a prison cell, a large prison cell under very hectic conditions with seven, um, ISIS suspects. Because by then they were rounding up people left, right and center because ISIS was really, um, you know, giving it to them up in the north. And of course the Iraqis abused it. You know, they, if they didn't like the neighbor or they didn't like the employer or they didn't like the way they got spoken to the point of thing and say, hey, this guys, ISIS, it, it, it, and, and I mean, people had to look into it.

Johann Raath:

[15:10](#)

The police in the military, I had to look into it. So a lot of people got rounded up unnecessarily. But I was in a cell with seven ISIS suspects. I was certainly there for two days. Now the plan I found out afterwards was to hang me because they hang people every week in Iraq on article four terrorism. And that was the, that's a very serious charge. If you get charged with terrorism and they can find you guilty then and then they can hang you. And so I found out that that was the plan to find me guilty in a very short space of time and to hang me, to take me out of play. But luckily when I went down to Basra, when I got this project going and I had the maritime approvals, scarring and so on and so forth, I also met with a lot of generals and colonels and one can ascertain who's the good ones into this, the bad ones.

Johann Raath:

[15:53](#)

So I made friends with the good ones. Luckily when I was in jail, um, I could pull back on some of the generals in Basra that knew me, that knew that I worked in Iraq for over a decade. They knew the project and they knew it was legitimate. They helped us with all our approvals, with our firearms and now movement orders and everything. So they got me out. They actually, um, you know, so I'm glad I did that kind of bridgework when I got there and befriended these generals because if I stayed in that jail a little bit longer, they would have found me guilty sooner rather sooner than later and I could have been done. Yeah, I got out and in jail there's two days day I got very sick, I was poisoned. The food that they gave me was poisoned. And I also picked up a viral infection in my brain because it was unsanitary conditions.

Johann Raath: [16:43](#) Like you can't believe it. It was really, it was, it was a hell hole. And so I had to be flown back to South Africa. I was very sick, almost kicked the bucket and I had to do surgery on me to release pressure on my brain, um, from the viral infection that I picked up there, from the unsanitary conditions and also the after effects of the poisons that they put in my food, uh, my survived it. But it was an interesting curve. You know, in the old days we were looking at four rockets, mortars, IED suicide bombers. But in the latter years in Iraq, you had to look out for the enemy with him.

Michelle Harven: [17:24](#) So you continued working until late 2017. Did you not, was there not part of you that said, screw this ?

Johann Raath: [17:33](#) I got injured in Iraq with that shoot at that first, um, shoot out that I explained when I was there for 10 days and we went on the recon mission. Um, I broke my shoulder badly in that contact and my arm, my left arm was partially, um, disabled. I couldn't use my left arm, but I didn't want to leave Iraq. I didn't want to leave. So we didn't want to leave our jobs scared that you might not come back and somebody else take it. So I worked for three years in, in Iraq from 2004 to seven with a broken shoulder. Um, that hurt like hell and you know, almost got addicted to some very serious painkillers. But then, you know, I left Iraq in 2007 for a while. I did contracting work in Africa and I had my shoulder fixed up. It took quite awhile.

Johann Raath: [18:18](#) Serious surgery, reconstructive. And then when I got sick in jail, but he now, because it's not a physical sky, it was a virus. It was poison. It's stuff you're going to see. And you know, I came to South Africa, I was diagnosed with this and that and the next thing they said they had to intervene and do surgery on me to release the pressure on my brain. I had it done, but I also decided to go straight back. I know there were conspiracies and they were plans to come off to me again, but they didn't. So, you know, it's like falling off a horse when you get off. You have to get back in there and you have to ideate or otherwise you scared of it for life. And it worked. Um, they saw after awhile that they are not gonna run over. They're not going to run us out of town.

Johann Raath: [18:58](#) And the company started seeing less, um, losses. Um, and, and, and, you know, they turned their attention to other projects in the area that kicked off and they went there and they had aided those projects. So in a way it was the right thing to do, but you know, my family and my, uh, neurologist and my, my home doctor and everybody was very unhappy that I made the decision, but it was something that they had to be done, you

know, otherwise they won't, they chase you away. They, they get you arrested, they scare you off and then you run away. So no, I had to go back.

Johann Raath: [19:32](#)

My body has taken a lot of punishment from my military days. I've had many surgeries reconstructive and otherwise, but one of the main reasons that I left Iraq is they had to build a shunt into my body that drains my brain. Now on a permanent basis, you know, I've got a pipe running from my spine into my stomach. It was serious surgery. And, um, there's silicone piping in me and as I'm talking to you here nowadays, 18 milliliters of brain fluid draining from my brain into my stomach. And that's a condition for life. Once I had that viral infection and it messes with the fluids in your brain, they have to keep these things in for life. So the project finished and I was called to back there and there was a position to be a PSD team leader and, and to work on PSD security and so on and so forth.

Johann Raath: [20:22](#)

So I gave it a try for a month. But the problem is now I couldn't wear body armor. So you know, because he's got the, it's got metal plating in it and it's tight fitting. And because I've got a small three millimeter silicon pipe in me, that's, that started to affecting, uh, the, the drainage from my brain. So I had the buildup of fluid in my brain again because I had to wear body armor on a daily basis where as a project manager, the south, I didn't, I wasn't really required, but, um, and, and, and I thought I was gonna die. You know, my one, I went blind and I had the day from hell. It feels like your head wants to explode because you've got too much pressure on your brain. And I said, you know, I've been around a long, long time, maybe it's time to call it today.

Johann Raath: [21:07](#)

Um, medically, uh, um, I'm injured. Um, I've, I've got a shank in me. I've got pipes in me, I've got stuff that's not really friendly towards that kind of lifestyle. And, and I called it today and I, you know, um, I started writing my book when I was there as a memoir, uh, for, for my generations to follow, to know what we've done because nobody's ever written about it. So I decided to come home to complete my book, um, and then know to, to see what, what direction my life went to take from there. But yeah, at the end of the day it was injury driven mostly, but it was also a time I've been contemplating it for awhile after that big project. And you know, after I did some good tweaking back there, I was thinking of calling it the day because you know, 20 years on the road, um, you don't have much of a family life.



Johann Raath:	<a href="#">21:56</a>	You know, my father passed away while I was in Iraq and I left Iran when I was 17. I never returned. I only saw my parents once or twice a year, maybe a Christmas Day year would, uh, they, the, and I wanted to spend time with my folks, but unfortunately that didn't pan out. Um, my dad died while the book was written and my mom is still alive and you know, now I am spending more time with my family and with old friends and catching up on stuff that we in by you for the last two, three years being a soldier in a private military contractor.
Desmon Farris:	<a href="#">22:30</a>	thanks to Johann Roth for talking with us for this episode to hear more, you can check out his book Blood Money: Stories of an Ex-Recce's Missions as a Private Military Contractor in Iraq.
Michelle Harven:	<a href="#">22:41</a>	In the next episode, we hear from Kimberly Motley, the first foreigner to litigate in the Afghan courts and how she fights for the private contractors who get caught in a corrupt system.
Kimberly Motley:	<a href="#">22:52</a>	Oh, I go to the judges. I said, how could you have found them guilty of this? And he didn't do this. And the judges looked at me and they were cooked Hughes and they said, we gave him the minimum. And I'm like, what? Because the minimum was two years and I told the Jonas and the minimum is not guilty. And so later I was a find out that in this court, no one had ever been found not guilty.
Desmon Farris:	<a href="#">23:18</a>	Don't forget to subscribe and while you're there, leave us a review. You can also let us know your thoughts <a href="mailto:podcast@stripes.com">podcast@stripes.com</a> also follow us on Twitter for updates <a href="#">@starsandstripes</a> .
Michelle Harven:	<a href="#">23:29</a>	Force for Hire's supervising editors are Bob Reid and Terry Leonard. Digital team lead and editor is Michael Darnell.
Desmon Farris:	<a href="#">23:37</a>	Thanks for listening.
Outro:	<a href="#">23:38</a>	This is Force for Hire.